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ABSTRACT

This report presents the results of a 1994-95 survey of U.S. colleges and universities offering doctorate, masters, and bachelors degrees in physics and astronomy, focusing on degree production and current student enrollment. It found that over the last 3 years, first-year graduate physics enrollments have declined 22 percent at doctorate-granting departments and 17 percent at masters-granting departments. The number of doctorates conferred has increased 60 percent since 1980, and women have made slow but steady gains among PhD recipients, with the PhD class of 1994 including 12 percent women. In 1994, 8 percent of the PhD-granting departments produced 29 percent of the doctorates. Undergraduate physics enrollments continued to decline, with junior enrollments dipping to a 30-year low in 1994. While foreign student enrollments continue to increase, especially in graduate programs, African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans continued to be underrepresented among physics graduates, while Asian-Americans continued to be overrepresented. Physics departments continued to provide service courses for other majors and enrolled approximately 360,000 students in introductory physics courses in 1994-95. An appendix provides data on degree and enrollment trends over the last 10 years. (MDM)

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AIP REPORT

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Elizabeth Dodge

AIP Pub No. R-151.32

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ENROLLMENTS AND DEGREES REPORT

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ENROLLMENTS AND DEGREES REPORT

HIGHLIGHTS

- During the last 3 years, first-year graduate physics enrollments have declined 22% at doctorate-granting departments and 17% at masters-granting departments **(Figure 6)**.
- Women have experienced slow but steady gains among physics PhD recipients. The PhD class of 1994 included 12% women **(Figure 12)**.
- The number of physics doctorates conferred has increased by 60% since 1980 **(Table 1)**. For the second straight year the number of astronomy PhDs conferred has exceeded 100 **(Appendix A2)**.
- Physics PhD production is not uniform across the 183 PhD-granting departments. For the class of 1994, 8% of the departments produced 29% of the doctorates **(Figure 11)**.
- Undergraduate physics enrollments continue to decline, with junior enrollments dipping to a three decade low **(Figure 2)**.
- Departments with only undergraduate physics programs are generally small, with three-quarters of them conferring fewer than six degrees in the class of 1994 **(Figure 3)**.
- Physics departments continue to provide service courses for other majors and enrolled approximately 360,000 students in an introductory physics course in 1994-95 **(Table 2)**.

Much concern throughout the years has been directed at the supply and demand for physics degree recipients. The supply is driven by decisions of hundreds of college and university physics departments, thousands of individual students and scores of funding agencies. The demand responds to economic and political conditions on a national and global scale. In cases of disjuncture, as at present, there is an increase in calls for assessing the situation and developing measures to improve the balance between supply and demand.

The primary focus of this report is to track physics and astronomy degree production and to monitor current student enrollment. As will be discussed in detail in the pages to follow, recent declines in enrollments foretell significant drops in degree production at both the physics bachelors and doctorate levels.

Unfortunately, these declines will not alleviate the employment difficulties being experienced by many of today's graduates.

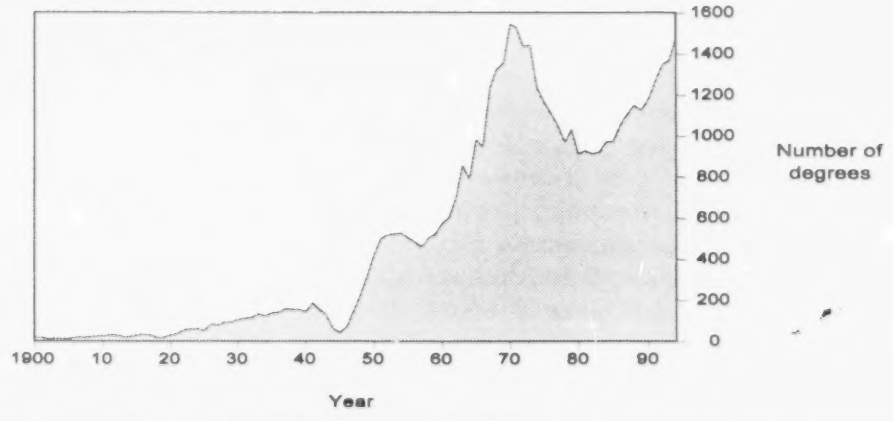
The Education and Employment Statistics Division of the American Institute of Physics has been conducting the Survey of Enrollments and Degrees for over thirty years. This report series provides data that reflect the historical trends in physics and astronomy education. Conducted during the fall of 1994 and winter of 1995, the survey asked degree-granting physics and astronomy departments to provide undergraduate and graduate enrollments, as well as the number of degrees conferred during the prior academic year.

The response rate for this survey was very good. All of the PhD departments and 9 out of 10 of the masters and bachelors-granting departments provided the requested information. (Estimates were developed for non-reporting departments based on information they supplied in previous years.) It is this level of involvement and cooperation on the part of the physics and astronomy departments across the country that makes it possible for us to provide an accurate picture of the current situation for physics graduates and a reliable set of historical trends against which to compare that picture.

Almost a century of US physics doctorate production is presented in **Figure 1**. This graph demonstrates that physics PhD production has continually gone through periods of major shifts. These shifts mirror changes in the total doctorate production in all disciplines through the 1960s. Subsequently the curves diverge - national PhD production leveled off while physics doctorate production fell sharply during the 1970s and then rebounded equally rapidly during the 1980s and early 90s. These changes have occurred in response to forces and events in the larger society, including hot and cold wars, economic booms and recessions, waves of immigration, seesawing government policies and public attitudes toward science, as well as in response to dynamics internal to the physics community. The recent changes in enrollment patterns, which will be discussed later in this report, suggest that these fluctuations in degree production are far from over.

The production of PhDs in physics has varied greatly over time, but for the last two decades the number of departments offering a PhD has remained quite stable. The number of bachelors- and masters-granting departments, in contrast, has shown considerable decline. **Table 1** shows the number of departments categorized by highest degree offered going back to 1975. The relative stability among the PhD-granting departments masks minor shifts that occur annually as graduate programs are expanded, created or discontinued. Throughout this report, the enrollments and degree production data will be broken out by these three types of degree-granting departments.

Figure 1. Number of physics PhDs conferred in the United States, 1900 to 1994.



Sources: ACE (1900-19), NAS (1920-61), AIP (1962-94)

Table 1. Departments by highest physics degree offered, 1975-1995.			
Academic year	Doctorate-granting	Masters-granting	Bachelors-granting
1974-75	171	121	559
1979-80	175	96	501
1984-85	173	90	487
1989-90	176	86	496
1994-95	183	76	485

Tables A1 and **A3** in the appendix of this report present ten years of data on physics degree production and enrollments at these departments. A decade of astronomy totals are presented in **Table A2**, also in the appendix. In addition, the Education and Employment Statistics Division annually publishes Rosters of Physics and Astronomy Departments which include information on Enrollments and Degrees at the department level.

INTRODUCTORY ENROLLMENTS

In addition to offering a full range of courses leading to an undergraduate or graduate degree in physics, an important function of almost all physics departments is to provide introductory physics courses for both science and non-science majors (See **Table 2**). These courses are often tailored to the needs of a student's potential major, with the amount of math background required varying by type of major. The calculus-based courses tend to service the engineering and physical science majors. A background in algebra is required for most of the courses designed for the life science majors. Finally, the courses with no math prerequisite are geared primarily for the social science and humanities majors. The overwhelming "service course" character of the introductory physics courses can be seen in the fact that only a small fraction (<2%) of the students taking these courses eventually end up with a physics bachelors degree.

Introductory enrollments are not evenly distributed across all departments. Categorizing the departments by the highest physics degree offered shows that over half of the introductory courses are taught at the large research universities, which comprise only one-quarter of the departments included in the study. These doctorate-granting departments also have the greatest proportion of their courses requiring a background in calculus. This may reflect a higher proportion of the undergraduates majoring in engineering at these universities.

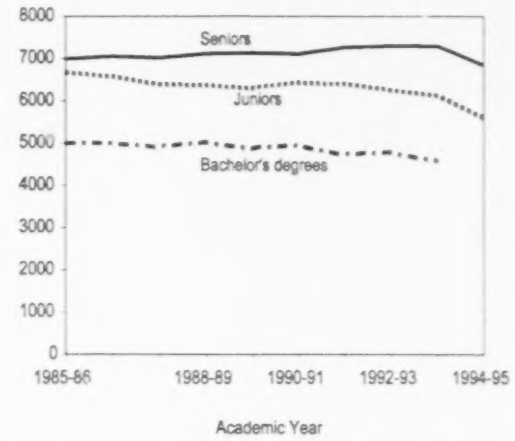
Table 2. Number of students enrolling in their first college / university introductory physics course, academic year 1994-95.					
	Math background required for course				
Highest degree of physics dept.	Calculus	Algebra	No college math	Total	%
Doctorate-granting	101,000 49%	70,000 34%	36,000 17%	207,000 100%	58
Masters-granting	14,000 29%	19,000 40%	15,000 31%	48,000 100%	13
Bachelors-granting	35,000 33%	38,000 36%	32,000 31%	105,000 100%	29
Totals	160,000 42%	127,000 35%	83,000 23%	360,000	100%

Note: Only colleges and universities offering at least a bachelors degree in physics are included in this table.

UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENTS / DEGREES

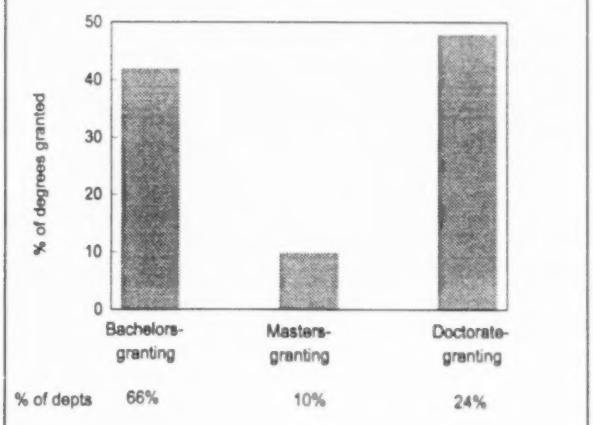
Though students may begin their college education having decided upon a potential major, it's often not until their junior year that they are required to declare one. Focusing on the trend of junior enrollments as a reliable predictor of future bachelors production, **Figure 2** shows that a substantial decline in undergraduate degrees is imminent. The number of juniors has dropped 13% since 1992, bringing this year's total to a level not seen since the 30-year low reached around 1980. (The number of seniors enrolled is not as effective a predictor of future degrees due to the number of students who maintain senior status for more than one year before receiving their degrees.)

Figure 2. Undergraduate physics enrollments and degrees, 1986-1995.



The downturn in the number of junior level physics majors since 1992 is not uniform across department type. The greatest decline (24%) has occurred at the masters-granting departments. The decline at the doctoral-granting departments was 13%, and still smaller declines occurred at the bachelors-granting departments with a decline of 8%. It is not currently clear why there is such a disproportionate drop in junior enrollments across department type.

Figure 3. Distribution of physics bachelors degrees by highest degree offered at the physics department, 1994.



These different rates of change are superimposed on an already uneven enrollment distribution among the departments at different degree-granting levels. **Figure 3** presents this imbalance for the bachelors degrees conferred in the class of 1994. The doctorate-granting departments, which represent one quarter of the departments that grant bachelors degrees in physics, produced almost half of the bachelors conferred. These larger research departments average about three times the number of physics graduates per department as bachelors-only departments and twice as many as the masters departments.

Figure 4 further illustrates how the size of a department's undergraduate class varies by highest physics degree offered. Among four-year colleges, 75% of the degrees came from small departments with five or fewer degrees being conferred. The masters departments had a similar distribution, with the smaller departments producing the majority of their bachelors degrees. The doctorate departments, in contrast, have a different profile, with an overall average of about 13 bachelors per department. This figure is greatly influenced by a small number of departments that conferred 20 or more degrees. These 32 large departments (4% of all departments) together produce almost a quarter of all bachelors degrees in physics for the class of 1994.

Figure 4. Distribution of bachelors degrees by department type and number of degrees granted, class of 1994.

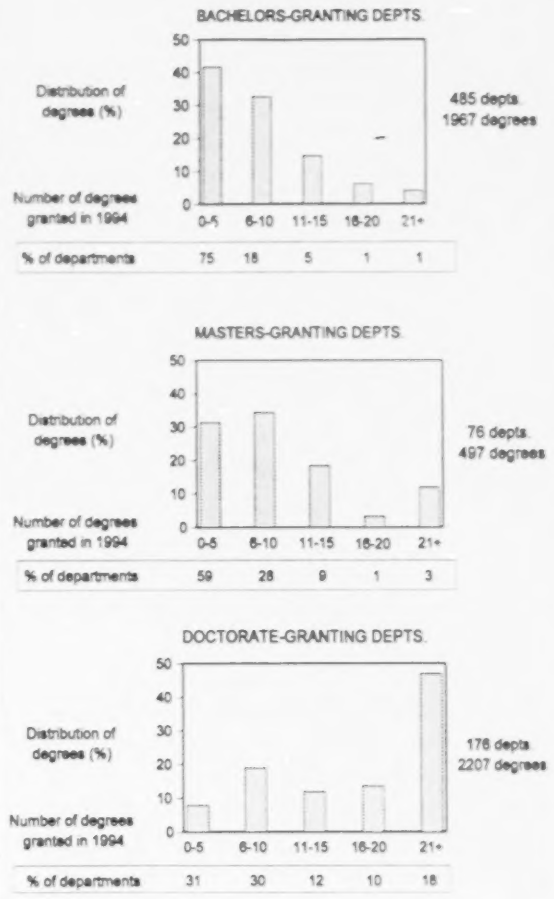
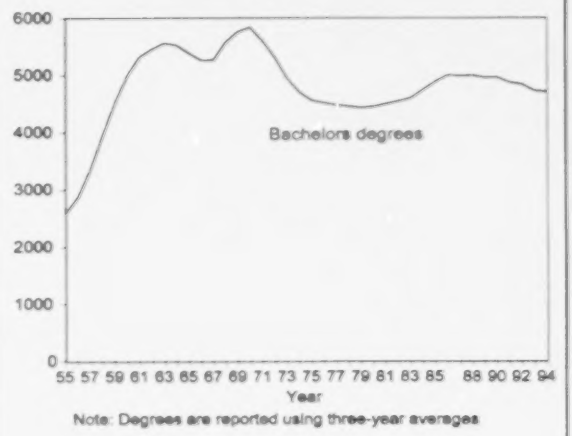


Figure 5. Physics bachelors production in the US, 1955-1994.



UNDERGRADUATE WOMEN AND MINORITIES

Women, a group that has historically been underrepresented among physics students, have registered slow gains in recent years. Their overall share of physics bachelors degrees has risen to 17% for the class of 1994, from 14% a decade earlier. As was true in years past, women were slightly better represented at the bachelors-granting institutions than at the doctorate-granting ones, with 18% and 16% respectively.

Bachelors degree totals have been declining in recent years. Last year the group exhibited a 4% drop, and has now declined a total of 8% during the last five years. This decline, which the undergraduate enrollment figures suggest will continue, comes at a time when total bachelors degree production in this country is increasing. Four decades of physics bachelors degree production are presented in **Figure 5**.

When considering the representation of minorities among the bachelors, **Table 3** does not take into consideration the 7% of the bachelors in the class of 1994 with foreign citizenship. African-Americans and Hispanics continue to be underrepresented among the undergraduate degree recipients in physics. Asian-Americans, in contrast, continue to be overrepresented among physics bachelors.

Table 3. Number of physics bachelors degrees granted to US citizens by minority / ethnic group status, class of 1994		
Ethnic group	Number	Percent
White	3774	88
African-American	180	4
Asian	163	4
Hispanic	103	2
Other	63	1
Total US citizens	4283	100%

Note: Total does not add to 100% due to rounding.

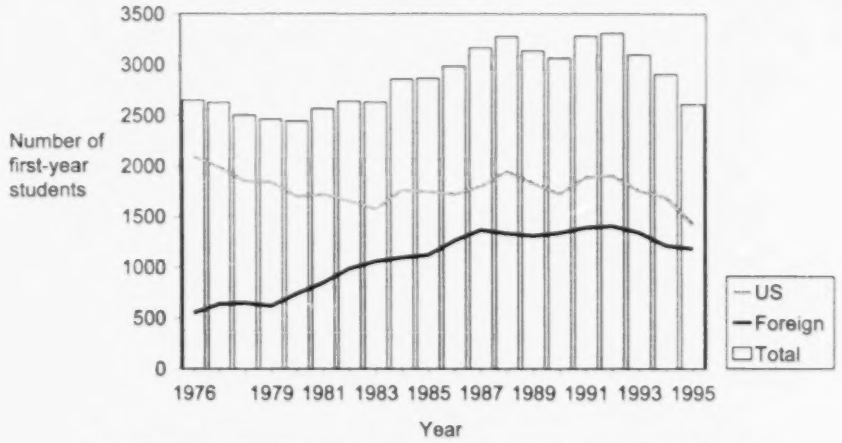
GRADUATE STUDENTS

Traditionally, a substantial proportion of those earning bachelors degrees in physics go on to pursue a higher degree in the field. About one-third of recent physics bachelors planned on immediately entering graduate study in physics. By the same token, a bachelors degree in physics predominates among the undergraduate backgrounds of the first-year graduate physics students, with about 90% having received that degree.

During the 1990s much attention has been given to the mismatch of students receiving doctorates and the number of available employment positions. The supply end of this imbalance is starting to adjust with first-year graduate physics student enrollments declining for the third consecutive year. The drop was 10% last year and 21% since 1992 and has occurred among both US and non-US students (See **Figure 6**). A decline of this amplitude has not been seen since the early 1970s, also a period of poor employment prospects for physics doctorates.

There are two main controlling factors which influence first-year student enrollments: the departments and the students. The departments may be reducing the number of students they accept due to budget restrictions, fewer qualified applicants, or efforts to reduce the number of students who ultimately get a physics PhD. From the student perspective, there may be fewer students applying to physics graduate departments, either because they are stopping their education at an earlier point or because they are choosing other fields to pursue. Both of these factors could be seen as reactions to the current shortage of available employment positions for PhD physicists. These declines, regardless of the cause, are not likely to reverse themselves until the job market for PhD scientists rebounds.

Figure 6. First-year US and foreign graduate physics students, 1976 to 1995.

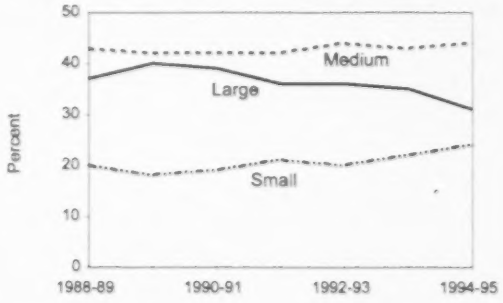


Note: Refinement in wording may slightly raise the 1995 foreign citizen totals relative to that reported in earlier years.

First-year student enrollments have been dropping at both masters- and doctorate-granting departments. Our attention will now focus on the doctorate departments where the student declines have been the greatest, in an attempt to foresee where the impending declines in doctorate production will be concentrated. **Figure 7** and **8** show the distribution of first-year students at doctorate-granting departments when categorized by size and ranking of department. Although the past three years has seen a dramatic overall decline of 22% in first-year enrollments at PhD departments, the distribution of first-year students when divided by these departmental characteristics has remained relatively stable. The slight decline among larger departments, as seen in **Figure 7**, may result from their ability to modestly reduce first-year enrollments without drastically reducing their overall department size. **Figure 8** separates the first-year student enrollments by departmental ranking. The stability of the first-year student enrollments when divided in this manner, indicates uniform declines across departments of varying ranks.

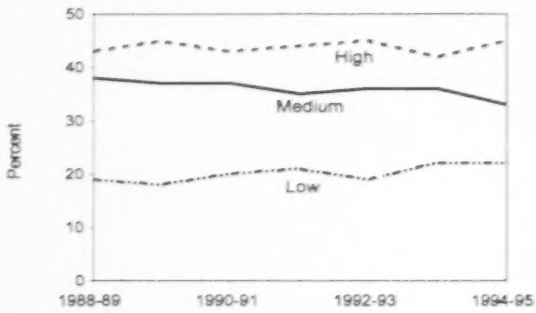
These dwindling first-year enrollments are being reflected in reductions in total graduate physics enrollments. Since 1992, the total graduate physics enrollments have declined by 8%, with a 6% drop at the doctorate-granting departments and 17% at the masters-granting departments. Graduate students attending the doctorate-granting departments are more likely to be enrolled on a full-time basis and include 44% non-US citizens. The masters-granting departments have a smaller proportion of full-time students and contain only 34% non-US citizens. Appendix **Tables A1** and **A3** show the totals for graduate student enrollments with breakdowns by department type for the last ten years.

Figure 7. Percent of total first-year graduate students enrolled by size* of department, 1989-1995.



* Size was determined by averaging the 1988-89 and 1989-90 first-year students classes for each department. There were 69 small departments with 0-10 first-year students, 63 medium departments with 11-25 first-year students and 29 large departments with 26 or more first-year students.

Figure 8. Percent of total first-year graduate students enrolled by rank* of department, 1989-1995.



* Departmental reputation rankings are taken from "An Assessment of Research Doctorate Programs in the United States: Mathematical & Physical Sciences", NAP 1982. Unranked departments are not included.

GRADUATE DEGREES

The first degree option available to a graduate student in physics is the masters degree. This degree can be earned in three very different ways.

1. A student may earn a Masters Enroute to obtaining a PhD. In 1994, about 2/3 of the PhDs reported having received physics masters degrees at some point in their graduate careers.

2. A student may earn a Professional Masters as the intended outcome of the graduate program in which they enrolled. Since the highest degree available at some departments is the masters, all degrees granted from those departments will be considered a

Professional Masters. This degree may also be the intended outcome of students enrolled in a masters program within a department that also offers the doctorate.

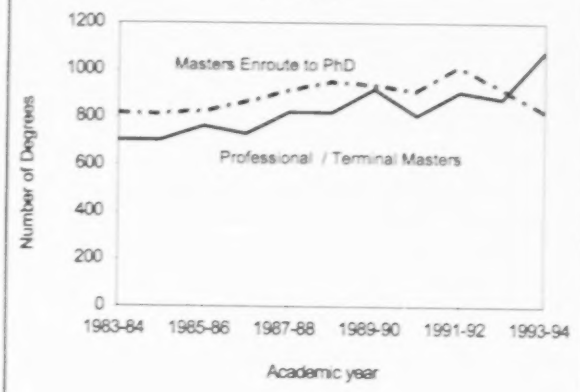
3. A student may start out enrolled in a PhD program, but then leave with only a masters. Degrees earned in this manner have been labeled Terminal Masters and can only be earned from a department that grants PhDs.

Students who earn Masters Enroute degrees are easily distinguished by the continued enrollment in that department, but the distinction between Professional and Terminal Masters at the doctoral departments is harder to discern from departmental records alone, since it involves a student's initial intentions as well as outcomes. For this reason, these two latter degree types are grouped together in one category in this report.

Figure 9 presents the trend in masters degree production for the last decade. The drop in Masters Enroute coincides with declining first-year graduate enrollments and is a precursor of the impending fall-off in PhD production. This fall-off may be further accelerated by the other trend in **Figure 9**, the jump in Professional/Terminal Masters degrees, which is especially concentrated in PhD-granting departments. This jump may be attributable to students exiting doctorate studies early with only a masters degree.

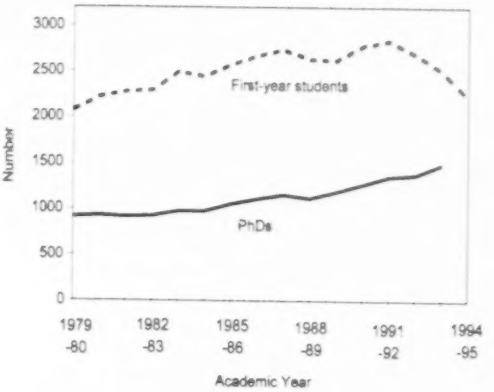
Interestingly, twice as many Professional/Terminal Masters were conferred at doctorate departments as at master-granting departments. Overall, 15% of the 1994 Professional/Terminal Masters recipients were women and 43% were foreign citizens. The proportion of US minorities earning Professional/Terminal Masters is as low as the proportion earning physics bachelors.

Figure 9. Physics masters degrees awarded in the US, 1984-1994.



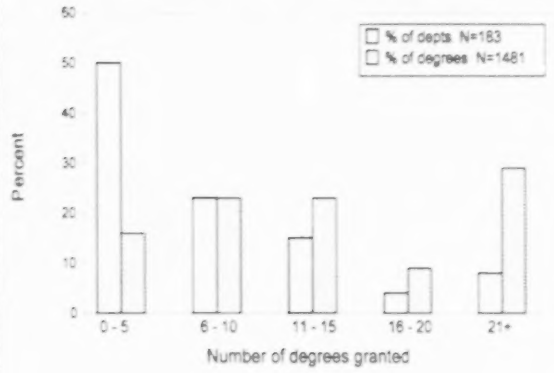
As noted above, declining Masters Enroute degrees in **Figure 9** is an indicator of fewer students currently pursuing a doctorate degree. An even more telling indicator may be the number of first-year students enrolling at PhD-granting departments, as not all graduate students obtain the intermediate masters degree. **Figure 10** plots both first-year enrollments and PhD production by academic year. Given the roughly seven-year lag between first-year graduate enrollment and receiving a PhD, one can project the imminent leveling and then steady decline in PhD production.

Figure 10. First-year graduate student enrollment and PhD production at US Doctorate-granting departments, 1980 - 1995.



Similar to the physics bachelors, the distribution of PhDs conferred is far from uniform across departments. If we use the number of PhDs conferred in the class of 1994 as a snapshot indicator of department size, **Figure 11** reveals the extent of the imbalance. Half of all the departments produced between zero and five PhDs, but these departments accounted for only 15% of the total doctorates in the class of 1994. On the other end, a small number of very large departments produce a sizable proportion of the degrees, with the 14 largest departments responsible for 29% of the doctorates in the class of 1994.

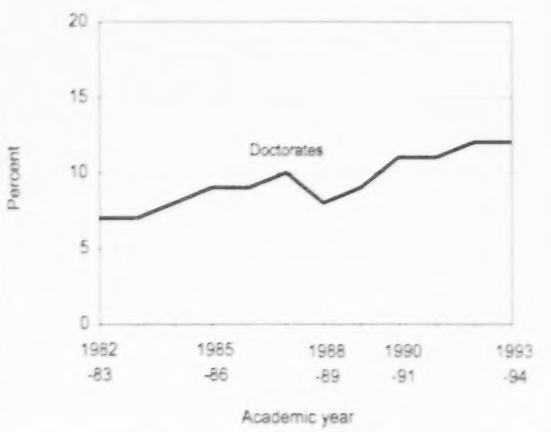
Figure 11. Distribution of doctorate-granting departments and share of PhD production by size of 1993-94 degree class.



DOCTORATE MINORITIES, WOMEN AND NON-US CITIZENS

Although the representation of women among the physics doctorates remains lower than among bachelors and masters recipients, it has nonetheless shown a slow but steady rise over the last decade (See **Figure 12**). In contrast, the representation of US Blacks and Hispanics among the doctorates has remained very small at around one percent each (See **Table 4**).

Figure 12. Percent of doctorates in physics granted to women, classes of 1983-1994.



During this same period, non-US citizens have grown to represent a sizeable proportion of the physics PhD recipients. For the class of 1994 they comprised 46% of the degrees conferred, with the majority (62%) coming from East Asia. Virtually all of the increase in PhDs conferred between 1980 and 1992 (See **Figure 1**), is attributable to the growing number of foreign citizens receiving degrees.

Table 4. Number of physics PhDs granted to US citizens by minority / ethnic group status, class of 1994.

Ethnic group	Number	Percent
White	751	93
Asian	30	4
African-American	11	1
Hispanic	9	1
Other	4	<1
Total	805	100%

ASTRONOMY

There are 68 degree-granting astronomy departments in the US. About half of these departments are administered in combination with the physics department at the same university. Almost 60% of the astronomy departments have a doctorate program, compared with only 25% of the physics departments. All of these graduate-level astronomy departments are at institutions that also have graduate programs in physics, and three-quarters of them are in fact combined with doctorate physics programs.

A decade's worth of astronomy enrollments and degree production is given in **Table A2** of the appendix. Detail by highest degree available is given in **Tables 5** and **6** for the 1994-95 enrollments and 1993-94 degrees. Two-thirds of all students taking introductory astronomy do so at physics departments where no astronomy degree is offered (See **Table 5**).

The characteristics of the astronomy degree recipients differ in a number of respects from their physics counterparts. Women comprise 25% and 17% of the astronomy bachelors and doctorate recipients respectively, compared to 17% and 12% for physics graduates. Moreover, only 27% of the astronomy graduate students are foreign citizens, as against 43% of the physics graduate students.

Table 5. Astronomy enrollments by highest astronomy degree available at that department, academic year 1994-95.

		Bachelors-granting	Masters-granting	Doctorate-granting	Totals
Introductory* course enrollments	Astro. Depts.	8,600	2,200	37,200	48,000
	Physics Depts.	35,500	16,300	34,000	85,500
Astronomy undergraduate	Juniors	66	19	184	269
	Seniors	81	26	244	351
First-year graduate students	US	-	11	105	116
	Foreign	-	1	48	49
Total graduate students	US	-	28	634	662
	Foreign	-	7	236	243

* Totals for combined physics & astronomy departments are included among the astronomy departments

Table 6. Astronomy degrees conferred by highest astronomy degree available at that department, class of 1994.

Highest degree offered	Number of degrees				Number of departments
	Bachelors	Professional/ Terminal Masters	Masters enroute	Doctorates	
Bachelors-granting	51	-	-	-	24
Masters-granting	15	9	-	-	4
Doctorate-granting	137	25	73	117	40
Totals	203	34	73	117	68

APPENDIX

Table A1. Trend in physics enrollments* and degrees, academic years 1985 to 1995.

Academic year	Number of physics degrees granted			Undergraduate physics major enrollments		Graduate physics student enrollments	
	Bachelors	Total Masters**	PhDs	Juniors	Seniors	1st year	Total
1984-85	4983	1518	972	6601	6783	2863	11337
1985-86	5013	1589	1051	6689	6992	2981	12011
1986-87	5011	1596	1105	6592	7054	3162	12616
1987-88	4937	1733	1150	6412	7017	3274	13143
1988-89	5033	1781	1112	6390	7116	3132	13361
1989-90	4898	1857	1183	6313	7131	3059	13708
1990-91	4950	1718	1264	6445	7115	3278	14065
1991-92	4770	1918	1346	6435	7268	3306	14534
1992-93	4800	1797	1369	6287	7297	3090	14430
1993-94	4615	1899	1481	6146	7289	2902	14201
1994-95				5620	6836	2604	13285

* Includes part-time students.
** Includes both Terminal / Professional Masters and Masters enroute.

Table A2. Trend in astronomy enrollments* and degrees, academic years 1985 to 1995.

Academic year	Number of astronomy degrees granted				Undergraduate astronomy major enrollments		Graduate astronomy student enrollments	
	Bachelors	Masters enroute	Terminal Masters	PhDs	Juniors	Seniors	1st year	Total
1984-85	145	54	18	66	239	212	151	716
1985-86	169	58	27	86	232	252	170	711
1986-87	172	37	44	72	268	255	173	755
1987-88	181	49	26	94	250	285	171	731
1988-89	196	71	22	94	213	275	169	780
1989-90	176	75	19	89	223	236	186	842
1990-91	200	65	25	73	312	284	226	914
1991-92	186	80	31	93	290	331	175	935
1992-93	190	46	56**	119	337	348	173	939
1993-94	203	73	34	117	257	388	180	901
1994-95					269	351	165	905

* Includes part-time students.
** Thirty-four Masters came from the Arizona Summer Science Institute for science teachers at the University of Arizona.

Table A3. Trend in physics enrollments* and degrees by institution type, academic year 1994-95.							
	Number of physics degrees granted			Undergraduate physics major enrollments		Graduate physics student enrollments	
Academic year	Bachelors	Total Masters**	PhDs	Juniors	Senior	1st year	Totals
Doctorate-granting institutions							
1984-85	2355	1286	972	3059	3466	2443	10357
1985-86	2315	1358	1051	3120	3468	2574	10937
1986-87	2360	1357	1105	3132	3647	2667	11389
1987-88	2360	1432	1150	3030	3594	2737	11880
1988-89	2421	1465	1112	3018	3598	2638	12069
1989-90	2365	1490	1183	2877	3664	2623	12440
1990-91	2376	1414	1264	3082	3694	2782	12700
1991-92	2261	1530	1346	3057	3729	2831	13118
1992-93	2253	1463	1369	3038	3845	2688	13222
1993-94	2203	1554	1481	2920	3729	2509	13042
1994-95				2648	3103	2209	12173
Masters-granting institutions							
1984-85	648	232		974	949	420	980
1985-86	632	231		1014	1012	407	1074
1986-87	627	239		913	980	495	1227
1987-88	564	301		871	918	537	1263
1988-89	561	316		822	1008	494	1292
1989-90	494	367		773	969	436	1268
1990-91	541	304		800	956	496	1365
1991-92	525	388		802	938	475	1416
1992-93	448	334		719	887	405	1208
1993-94	475	345		696	930	393	1159
1994-95				610	813	395	1113
Bachelors-granting institution							
1984-85	1980			2568	2368		
1985-86	2066			2555	2512		
1986-87	2024			2547	2427		
1987-88	2013			2511	2505		
1988-89	2051			2550	2510		
1989-90	2039			2663	2498		
1990-91	2033			2563	2470		
1991-92	1984			2576	2601		
1992-93	2099			2530	2565		
1993-94	1937			2530	2630		
1994-95				2362	2570		

* Includes part-time students

** Includes both Professional / Terminal Masters and Masters Enroute.